

Implementing a Blueprint for Transition Success

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Abstract:

This paper explores the question “how is good practice for managing the transition of students into university institutionalised in a large university?” by describing the implementation of two elements of our Blueprint for transition success. These elements are a staff-focused teamwork resource which asks “can a teamwork protocol for academic staff improve the design of teamwork units and improve the learning experience for first year students?”; and a project to implement good practice for monitoring student engagement which asks “how do we prevent, identify and manage students who are at risk of disengagement, to improve opportunities for student persistence and to minimise unexplained attrition?”. Because we know that the mere existence of these resources or conduct of the projects alone will not improve practice or the outcomes for students, these projects have been selected as vehicles for the Blueprint’s implementation because they engender high levels of staff participation and contribution.

Introduction

The Enhancing Transition at QUT Project (ET@QUT) is a research-led capacity building initiative that aims to establish a comprehensive framework for managing the experience of new students entering the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). The program is now in its final year of three years of funded activity. In the first two years, ET@QUT initiated nine projects that developed new knowledge or reusable resources to enhance students’ transition experiences across QUT. Together these projects constitute our “Blueprint for Enhanced Transition” (Nelson et al 2006). On a practical basis each of the projects applies knowledge about learning and teaching in the context of commencing students or generates new resources to support their transition experiences. From a research perspective each of the projects addresses a gap in our understanding about the transition experiences of students and/or about the institutional elements that enhance this experience by creating new knowledge from the data collected.

Last year in this forum, we outlined these projects and the processes by which we proposed to embed the Blueprint within and across the institution (Nelson et al, 2006). Crucial to the success of ET@QUT is an imperative to raise awareness about the critical transition issues

amongst all staff responsible for first year students, and to embed good practice to address this agenda throughout the university. Therefore the focus in 2007 is to disseminate information and exemplars of good practice arising from the projects across the wider university context. In this paper we describe two of the four (from nine original) projects we have selected as vehicles for the institutionalisation of the Blueprint during the final year of ET@QUT in response to the question “*how is good practice for managing the transition of students into university institutionalised in a large university?*”

In the first section of this paper, all four projects and their importance to the first year experience are briefly introduced. Then, two of the projects’ underpinning the research questions and a summary of the supporting literature are described, followed by a description of the processes we are using to implement these critical elements of the Blueprint. Details of the research methods and findings of each of these projects are the topics of other forthcoming papers and are not reported here.

Four vehicles for institutionalising the Blueprint

Four key projects have been selected to raise awareness that transition issues can be addressed within the curriculum by making appropriate knowledge or resources available. These projects were selected because they offered the greatest opportunities for staff engagement through contributions, discussion, focus groups and working parties *and* because they were critical for student persistence *or* required the uptake of resources by staff. Two of these projects primarily support students as follows:

- *Conflict Resolution* – a resource for students and staff to understand and manage the various forms of teamwork conflict by offering a ‘ready reference’ for conflict resolution strategies;
- *Monitoring Student Engagement* – visualising the processes required to prevent, detect, and manage students who are struggling with their first semester, or who are showing signs of disengagement, to facilitate case-management of these students.

Two of the projects focus primarily on the uptake of resources by staff as follows:

- *Teamwork Protocol* - the promotion and uptake of a staff-focused set of principles and guidelines as a first point of reference for academic staff to design and manage units involving teamwork;
- *Resource Inventory* – creating a meta-data repository that describes the resources (learning objects) available to support first year curricula and to make the information (meta-data) about these resources available for all staff.

One project from each of these categories: *Monitoring Student Engagement* and the *Teamwork Protocol* are described in the sections that follow.

Teamwork Protocol – can a Teamwork Protocol for academic staff improve the design of teamwork units and improve the learning experience for first year students?

ACNielsen’s ‘Employer Satisfaction with Graduate Skills’ Research Report (2000) highlighted the importance of generic capabilities in all new graduates. Teamwork skills were perceived as essential in the recruitment of new graduates and of the 25 skills outlined in the survey, teamwork skills were deemed as more important than leadership qualities, customer/client focus and written business communications skills (p. 14-16). In 2001, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia undertook a major research project to provide detailed information on the skill needs of industry (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002). This project identified key generic employability skills that enterprises argue individuals should have, together with job specific and technical requirements. Communication and teamwork skills were highlighted as being vital whether the

enterprise was a small or large organisation (p.40). Accordingly, there is a focus on the importance of developing teamwork skills at university to ensure success and competency in the workplace. Yet, during the transition to university, negative teamwork experiences can shape the future acquisition and application of these skills (James et al, 2002). Although the development of teamwork skills at a tertiary level is viewed as essential, successful teamwork experiences are often elusive and there is resistance from students to this form of assessment (James 2002, Caspersz 2002). We (and others) believe it is inappropriate to expect students to have good teamwork experiences unless learning about teamwork is scaffolded into study programs and courses. In first year units this scaffolding might include intentional curriculum design that addresses elements of team dynamics, supported opportunities for learning about and experiencing teamwork and appropriate assessment items. Importantly in first year units, staff should make explicit the teamwork management processes so that there is a common understanding between students, and between staff and students, about the how teams will operate and how disputes arising from teamwork will be addressed. Strategies aimed at improving student teamwork experiences include resources to assist academic staff teach generic skills and Websites for staff and students involved in teamwork.

Universities provide online environments for teamwork and teamwork assessment (for example, see Westhorp, 2000; Freeman and McKenzie, 2002; Murray and Lonne 2006). The SkillCity Project (2002) is a Commonwealth-funded initiative to provide an online resource to assist academics teach generic skills, including teamwork, and allows lecturers to share materials and teaching resources. The project is a collaborative effort that began with staff at ten universities working to enhance students' professional communication skills. While not solely related to teamwork, this resource is an example of initiatives designed to assist academics in the teaching and learning of generic skills; online resource kits provide structure and content for academics grappling with issues around teamwork. Examples of other relevant online resources for academics include the University of Technology in Sydney's Learning and Teaching site 'Enhancing Experiences of Group Work' (<http://www.iml.uts.edu.au/learn/learn/teach/groupwork/index.html>) and the Centre for Studies in Higher Education (CSHE) which provides an online resource for assessment in higher education targeting group learning (<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/03/group.html>).

The weighting and distribution of marks in team assessment items is problematic for staff and students. One particularly contentious issue is the awarding of equal marks for what is sometimes perceived as unequal contributions. Equalising techniques such as peer and self assessment of individual contributions are recommended as a fairer way of weighting and negotiating the roles students undertake in teams (James et al 2002, Caspersz et al 2003, CSHE 2002). SPARK (Self and Peer Assessment Resource Kit) was developed by the University of Technology in Sydney and funded by the Commonwealth Government in 1997. SPARK automates the logistics of group project assessment marks and their distribution and provides time savings for academics marking group projects. Freeman and McKenzie (2002) note that SPARK works best when students are able to understand why team projects are necessary in their coursework. SPARK also requires academics to negotiate with students about which assessment framework will work best for each team and to instruct teams on how to use the template before teamwork begins (p. 565).

At QUT, an innovative online system has been developed to assist students and academics with teamwork. Murray and Lonne (2006) describe *TeamWorker* as: "A web-based, interactive software application which enables effective training, administration and oversight of student project teams including student peer assessment and assistance to facilitate productive, team

processes and dynamics” (p.64). *TeamWorker* allows students to organise, communicate, structure, record and report their activities. Teaching staff use it to schedule activities, monitor the progress of teams, identify deadlines and then become involved in the process if group dysfunction is identified (2006). *TeamWorker* is of immense assistance operationally for units involving teamwork however it assumes that other aspects of the learning environment (curriculum, learning materials, assessment item and supporting resources) are designed appropriately for teamwork.

In our project, we were unable to identify any resources on university sites or in the literature that focused on designing for and managing teamwork at an institutional level. For instance, at QUT, individual faculties and academics approach teamwork in vastly different ways, ranging from highly structured and managed, to unmanaged and unsupported. Current practices are not always designed to help students learn about teamwork or participate effectively in teams, and some assume that active learning about team theories or the reflective acquisition of team skills is not required. In consultation with colleagues representing all faculties at QUT, we agreed that a staff-focused set of principle-driven guidelines would provide an institutional foundation for good practice in first year units involving student teamwork. Developing and drafting the *Teamwork Protocol* entailed analysis of external resources and literature on teamwork and consultation with faculty staff involved in assessing teamwork processes and products. After several iterations and workshops the resulting *Teamwork Protocol* was signed off by the working party. Our *Teamwork Protocol* consists of four main principles, each with a rationale, series of strategies, and recommendations of good practice with exemplars. The principles are: the purpose of teamwork; designing for teamwork; team management and support; and assessment models. The *Protocol* also provides information on teamwork resources and templates to assist in the teaching process. In Semester One 2007, we are piloting the *Protocol* in two faculties in units that are using teamwork. We are in the process of converting it into an on-line resource to make it accessible for utilisation and evaluation across the university.

Implementing the Teamwork Protocol

The *Teamwork Protocol* is important resource for staff. However, it is unlikely that its mere existence will substantially change staff practices (or the student experience). Therefore in 2007 we are focusing on making this resource accessible across the institution online, by engaging staff, and by evaluating its utility for staff and students in specific units as it impacts on the teamwork experience and workload. The process we are using is summarised as follows:

- Analyse literature and resources (predevelopment), host academic and professional staff workshops, collect data, analyse and present findings and discuss with stakeholders, design and create resource concepts;
- Consult and workshop with stakeholder communities (students, professional and academic staff), followed by iterative refinement of the Protocol;
- Manage parallel streams of activity with early adopters: (1) converting text based resource into web accessible form; (2) trialling the *Protocol* with staff and students in two faculties, which includes mapping the extent of alignment between existing practices and the *Protocol*, and initiating new practices based on the *Protocol* guidelines into new or existing units;
- Evaluate student perceptions about the utility and usability of the resources, followed by discussion with stakeholders and further refinement if necessary;
- Host a *Protocol* “launch” – an event to promote the *Protocol* to key academic and professional staff, e.g. first year unit and course coordinators, learning and teaching consultants, language and learning advisors, Assistant Deans, Teaching and Learning;
- Assist faculty stakeholders identify opportunities (based on the mapping activity above) to embed the elements of the *Protocol* within units in their faculties;

- Assist unit coordinators redesign curriculum, assessment items, learning materials or unit management processes to accommodate the new learning resources;
- Augment resource with lessons learnt in the faculties and “hand over” the resource to the university teaching and learning community.

Monitoring Student Engagement – how do we prevent, identify and manage (if necessary) students who are having difficulties with the transition into university life, to improve opportunities for student persistence and to minimise unexplained attrition?

Engagement in learning is vital to achieving quality educational outcomes for students and institutions. Coates states that “the concept of student engagement is based on the constructivist assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities” (2005, p.26). In university contexts, “engagement refers to the time, energy and resources students devote to activities designed to enhance learning at university” (Krause, 2005, p.3). Krause summarises the considerable research on student engagement by noting that student participation in “engaging” activities has been shown to contribute to student satisfaction, academic success and persistence at university (Astin, 1985, 1993; Goodsell, Maher & Tinto, 1992; Kuh & Vesper, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005 – all as cited in Krause, 2005). Ultimately, engagement is the most important influence on student learning (Cleary & Skaines, 2005), and has a stronger impact on the university experience than do other factors such as student demographics, or choice of institution (Kuh, 2002).

Responsibility for student engagement lies with students (who must take responsibility for their learning) *and* with institutions and their teaching staff (who must provide the necessary “conditions, opportunities and expectations” for engagement to occur) (Coates, 2005, p.26). The sombre realities of contemporary Australian higher education, such as diminished government funding (leading to larger classes and growing academic casualisation) and less student time spent on campus and in class, are conditions that can easily exacerbate student disengagement. Increased levels of student employment and the related consequences of necessary flexibility in course delivery schedules, further reduce opportunities for engagement (Kift, 2004). Given these conditions, institutional commitment to enhancing and supporting student engagement can be seen as a measure of the quality of a university (Coates, 2005). Importantly, it is widely accepted that addressing student transition and engagement issues effectively requires a coherent, university-wide approach that involves academic, professional and support services staff collaborating with an explicit student-focus (see for example: McInnis, 1996; Abbott-Chapman and Edwards, 1999; Peel, 1999; Ashton and Beilby, 2000; Lintern, Johnston and O'Reagan, 2001).

The ultimate consequence of disengagement for students is withdrawal from their course before completion. However, the complexity of personal learning experiences means that it is impossible to identify a single cause to explain why students do not persist through their courses until completion. Tinto (1995) recognises multiple issues and variables, including academic difficulties, social adjustment, varied or unmet expectations, extra-curricular commitments, financial pressures, incongruence and isolation. What we do know is that attrition is highest amongst first year students (DEST, 2004). Therefore, it is important that student engagement is fostered from the very earliest weeks of their first semester, to combat the feelings of isolation and disconnectedness which are common amongst first year students and which rapidly lead to disengagement (Pargetter et al., 1998).

From an institutional perspective student attrition is a significant issue as it is in the broader community, not the least because of the associated “wasting of limited financial resources”, but

also because of the loss of intellectual capital and the potential loss of skilled workers (Promnitz & Germain, 1996, section 3, para 3). In this sense, institutional commitment to students becomes a critical factor in retention (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). Tinto (1995) claims that each institution must assess the particular characteristics of student departure from its campus and adds (Tinto 1995, p. 5):

Only in that manner can institutions identify and accurately target specific forms of actions to the task of student retention. Institutional assessment is, in this fashion, a necessary beginning step in the formulation of an effective retention program.

From the student perspective, positive reasons may exist to explain why some students choose to leave early (such as being offered different career or personal opportunities outside of the university), and therefore withdrawal from study is not always necessarily a negative outcome for students (Tinto, 1993). Some reasons are also beyond the scope of the university (e.g. changed family responsibilities or the onset of an illness); while it should also be remembered that a high proportion of students who withdraw from university will return to study at some later time (such as enrolling in a more appropriate course following a re-evaluation of career goals) (Yorke, 1998; McMillan, 2005). What is important is that these students are supported during their withdrawal process, so that their transition out of university life is as smooth as possible, stress is minimised and a positive relationship between the institution and the students is maintained.

While it is not possible to identify single causes for leaving, groups of contributing factors have emerged. Financial issues such as the high cost of living away from home, university fees and other study-related costs have been identified as the main cause of anxiety with rural students and students from remote areas (Hillman, 2005) and generally (Yorke and Longden, 2006). Unrealistic student expectations of the amount of work and time involved in university study have also emerged as a major concern for first year students (Pancer et al., 2000, McInnis et al., 2000). Smith and Wertlieb (2005) observe that the institution's flexibility and responsiveness in its interactions with students and staff contribute to the students' overall experience; conversely, when students feel they do not 'fit' in the environment, they may experience regrets and doubts about their decision to choose a particular university and subsequently leave the institution (p.3-4). In the UK, Yorke and Longden have recently found that the more students know about their institutions and courses before enrolling, the less likely they will withdraw: 40% of those with little to no prior knowledge of their program considered withdrawing, to be compared with only 25% of better informed peers (Yorke and Longden, 2006). First year students also find it difficult to engage in the learning process if their choice of course or motivation to attend is externally generated, such as from parents or teachers (McInnis and James, 1995; McLean et al., 1999; Pargetter et al., 1998; TEPA report, 2000). Similarly, students with lower tertiary entrance scores or those who enrol in a course specifically to increase their ranking have been identified as at risk of disengagement and withdrawal. Students who do not score highly on attitudes-to-school scales are also more likely to defer or withdraw from study (Hillman, 2005). A Queensland Studies Authority Report (in Phase 1) found that 51% of students withdrawing from courses claimed they had only entered university to improve their OP score or tertiary ranking (Queensland Studies Authority, 2004).

Australian institutions are introducing monitoring initiatives to identify those students having difficulties in first year (McInnis et al., 2000). For example, assessment items introduced early in the course are an opportunity for both students and teachers to gain a sense of student progress in the early weeks of the first year (McInnis et al., 2000, p.55) and to provide meaningful formative feedback. This technique has been identified and implemented at our University, which recommends that an early assessment task provides an opportunity for staff

to give detailed feedback on the assessment expectations and to identify students having difficulties (QUT FYE, 2002). Other strategies suggested for addressing academic transition issues have included providing informal contacts with faculty and offering counselling- or study-skills-based interventions (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994).

Our work, the *Monitoring Student Engagement (MSE)* project, aims to improve student transition and success in the university environment, reduce unexplained attrition, and improve persistence amongst first year students. Its approach is to identify individual students who are struggling with their first semester or are showing signs of disengagement, and to provide appropriate support for those students. This is a challenge for the coordinators of our large (>500 students) first year classes! The findings of the *MSE* project have highlighted the importance of early identification of students at risk of disengagement, increased collaborations between administrative, academic and support staff arranged around an explicit *student-focus*, and a university-wide commitment to improving the first year experience. To this end, the development of a coherent, coordinated and sustainable university-wide approach to first year student engagement was proposed in 2006 with the following activities underway in 2007 for implementation:

- A large qualitative survey was conducted in 2006 to understand students' expectations early in the semester and how well these expectations had been met at the end of the semester;
- A process mapping exercise (using event driven process chains) is underway with key professional and academic staff in areas that self-identify as having good practice for monitoring student engagement. The final map will be a visualisation of current activities and the interventions that are provided to manage individual experiences once disengagement is identified;
- Activities relating to enhancing student engagement, identifying disengagement and the availability and role of specific support services and processes will be incorporated into staff training for all staff (academic and professional);
- The process map will: provide a means of both communicating current good practice and comparing practices in various areas; identify the various initiatives that are designed to monitor student engagement and provide early interventions for at risk students; act as a model for other areas; allow process improvement; provide a design for developing systems to support monitoring and the improvement of data collection and dissemination; facilitate and encourage collaboration between professional areas (e.g. equity and counselling), academics and support staff, with particular attention to information sharing and case management;
- The visualisation will be presented to stakeholders for discussion;
- Faculty stakeholders will identify opportunities to improve their monitoring processes;
- ET@QUT team and lead stakeholders will assist unit coordinators implement processes, redesign curriculum and good classroom practice for specifically nominated units;
- Individual process maps will be created for all participating areas to accommodate different various faculty requirements.

Conclusion

This paper reports on two of the four projects we are focusing on in an attempt to resolve the question “*how is good practice for managing the transition of students into university institutionalised in a large university*”. Each of the projects poses its own research agenda and practical challenges and for these reasons our implementation processes include the collection of data to evaluate the effectiveness of the resources or information generated by these projects in implementing our Blueprint. The ultimate success of our ET@QUT project depends, not just

on creating useful resources and information, but on high levels of staff engagement and participation, which we believe are central to the Blueprint's success.

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